



Case report

Secondary combined suicide pact



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ABSTRACT

This article reports a combined suicide pact, where in a young couple; a 26 year old male and a 20 year old female committed suicide by using two methods. The couple had resorted to hanging and self-immolation to prevent failure of single method alone. In secondary combined suicides, several other methods of suicide are tried after the first method chosen has failed. It is primary combined suicide only when two or more methods are used simultaneously. Both types of combined suicide by one individual is well reported in the literature whereas the same by two persons together is rare. In this report, the deceased were disappointed lovers, poor and the family members were against their marriage. The investigation of scene, methods employed to commit suicide, autopsy findings and the interview with their relatives altogether suggested that it was a secondary combined suicide pact.

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1. Introduction

Suicides are classified into simple and complex, with complex referring to suicide by a combination of two or more methods. Complex suicides are then further categorised as planned and unplanned. The former is when the combination is previously planned to prevent failure of the first method and the latter is when the failure brings the victim to subsequently come up with an alternative method of inflicting death. The terms primary and secondary combined suicides are also used for the terms planned and unplanned complex suicides respectively. In primary combined suicides typically two of the generally common methods of suicide (e.g. poisoning, hanging, use of firearms, drowning, fall from a height) are combined. But also unusual combinations have been described such as the simultaneous firing of two guns, self-immolation in combination with other suicide methods or shooting oneself while driving a car. In secondary combined suicides self-inflicted injuries by sharp force, especially cuts of the wrists, are often found as the primary act of suicide. The chronological order of the methods applied can be reconstructed only if all information available on the given case is taken into consideration.¹ Though the use of multiple methods of self-destruction by one person is not uncommon the same in the form of suicide pact is rather unusual.

Such suicide pacts and homicide–suicide cases are hard to differentiate. Examination of the scene, autopsy and toxicological findings, can retrace the sequence of events and helps to determine the cause, manner, and mechanism of death. This paper highlights one such secondary combined suicide pact by disappointed lovers who had resorted to self-immolation when they survived the primary act of partial hanging.

2. Case report

The dead bodies of a young couple in their 20's were found burnt lying on the floor of a room provided for them at a construction site (Fig. 1). They had moved to the location a week earlier as construction labourers. The bodies were subjected for forensic autopsy. The female was aged 20 years and male was aged 26 years and both were of moderate build. Kerosene smell was emanating from the bodies. Post-mortem staining was present over back of the male body and was fixed. Tongue was protruded out in the female. Nail beds showed bluish discolouration in both the cases. First and second degree antemortem burns were present all over the female body except over the feet and over the front of trunk, front of both thighs and upper limbs of the male body (Figs. 2 and 3). Scalp hair was burnt in the female.

After careful examination of neck in both the bodies showed faint ligature mark measuring 18 cm × 2 cm (in both the cases) over the front and sides of the neck (Figs. 4 and 5). The marks were

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Fig. 1. Photograph showing burnt bodies, in the centre of the room in supine position with partial overlying. It also shows red coloured cut clothing (1) which was a part of the ligature material used by the female and a vegetable cutting instrument (2) at the top right hand corner. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

present over and above the thyroid cartilage. On dissection of neck, the tissues beneath the ligature mark were pale and glistening. Thyroid cartilage and hyoid bone were intact. Respiratory tract showed soot particles till terminal bronchioles. All internal organs were intact and congested. Stomach in both the cases contained about 150 ml of cream coloured fluid with no unusual smell, mucosa was normal. Histopathological examination of the burnt and adjacent unburned skin confirmed antemortem burns. Ligature material brought by the police were one red coloured veil and the other dark green coloured loin cloth measuring 115 cm and 94 cm in length respectively with one end of both the material burnt. On twisting the ligature material corresponded to the ligature marks and was able to withstand the weight of the body.

On examination of the scene photographs, it was observed that the unburned ends of ligature material were tied to the wooden pole on the ceiling (Fig. 6). The male body was lying below the green coloured ligature material and the female body was lying below the red coloured ligature material. The bodies were found lying in the supine position partially overlying each other. Scene



Fig. 2. Photograph showing first and second degree antemortem burns over the front of trunk, front of both thighs and upper limbs of the male body.



Fig. 3. Photograph showing first and second degree antemortem burns all over the female body.

examination revealed that the room was latched from inside and an empty jerry can smelling of kerosene and a sharp vegetable cutting instrument was also found in proximity to the bodies (Fig. 1). Toxicological analysis was negative.

Examination of the scene, autopsy, histopathological and toxicological findings indicated the cause of death in both the cases to burns.

3. Discussion

Secondary combined suicide pacts in forensic practice are uncommon. In suicide pacts, the deaths of partners are supposed to be with premeditation and cooperation, without coercion of one partner by the other. It was also found that at the time of committing suicide, the person leave suicide notes signed by both partners. Thus presence of such jointly signed suicide notes justifies that the death was with cooperation and mutual understanding. In such pacts both members typically employ the same method. A related phenomenon is a homicide–suicide episode in which a person commits murder of a related person and then ends his or



Fig. 4. Photograph showing neck with faint ligature mark over the front and sides of the neck in male body.



Fig. 5. Photograph showing neck with faint ligature mark over the front and sides of the neck in female body.

her life.² When a combined method is used by victims, differentiation between suicide pact and homicide–suicide is sometimes difficult, and a risk of misinterpretation always exists in such cases.³ A forensic pathologist has to keep in mind the possibility of a homicide–suicide while investigating deaths from combined suicide pact. Even with the best investigation of death, it would at times be difficult to discriminate the dyadic deaths into suicide pacts and homicide–suicide. In the 1397 case description files, we found 10 verified homicide–suicide cases. In addition, there were three cases where the perpetrator had attempted to kill someone immediately before the suicide, three cases of previous attempted homicide–suicide, and four suicide pacts.⁴

In such cases a visit to the scene before the body is moved is required and the position of body, the state of clothing, evidence of struggle, the position of stains, the condition of the surroundings and presence or absence of a farewell letter should be carefully noted. On the other hand, the finding of a weapon beside the body is not necessarily indicative of suicide as a murderer may leave a weapon at the scene of the crime to simulate suicide.³ While investigating a scene of death, forensic pathologist should try to reconstruct the chain of events and ascertain whether death was a

suicide or homicide. At autopsy the type of injuries present, their causation, vitality and severity has to be noted and correlated with the findings at death scene. The role of poisons and alcohol in such deaths should also be considered.

In our region, hanging is the most frequently used suicide method. Previous case presentations in the literature together with our suicidal subjects suggest that the victims of combined suicide pacts were young to middle-aged with male sex predominance. In some victims, various types of psychiatric disorders such as personality change, schizophrenia and depression could be revealed in the histories.^{5,6} In our case couple were in their 20's with no psychiatric and personality disorders. Rather they were hopeless and poor.

The deceased couple who were in love with each other were disappointed as their parents refused for marriage; they had left their family houses in a village and had moved to a city. They were recently employed as daily wage construction workers and were provided with a make shift accommodation at the construction site. From the information provided by the new neighbours it was evident that the couple were disappointed and uncertain about their future.

Burnt bodies were found in the centre of the room in supine position with partial overlying. Female body was burnt completely whereas male body was partially burnt which was in contact with female body. Just 5 feet above the burnt bodies' two ligature materials with their free ends burnt were found tied to the wooden pole which was used as a support for the roof of the shed. Ligature must have been applied during life as a narrow zone of hyperaemia around the ligature mark and hemorrhagic infiltrations of the skin were observed at autopsy indicating the antemortem nature of the mark. An empty jerry can, a cut unburned red clothing a part of the ligature material used for the female and a vegetable cutting instrument were also found in the room near the bodies (Fig. 1). The room was locked from inside and there was no farewell note. There were no evidence of a struggle or the presence of drag marks at the scene that was suggestive of homicide. All these findings together with social history, scene investigation and autopsy findings of victims strongly suggest that the manner of death to be suicidal.

Combination of mechanisms involved is complex. The duo had planned to end their lives by hanging. The accommodation was a shed of metallic sheets built of 6 feet height. As the height of the ceiling was not sufficient for complete suspension they were uncertain that they would die of hanging. Hence they had also planned for another method and had procured kerosene to burn themselves. The possibility in this suicide pact is that they would have tried to hang themselves which resulted in partial hanging and survival; male would have untied the ligature around his neck and then he would have used the vegetable cutting instrument present in the scene for cutting the ligature material of the female. Later they would have doused themselves with kerosene and set fire resulting in burns. Though antemortem ligature marks were present on the bodies, burns had resulted in death.

Unsuccessful attempts of hanging as the primary method of suicide can be shown less often. Under forensic aspects, this is possible only if a hanging mark can be demonstrated on the neck. At the death scene, a torn ligature or broken anchorage may point to a preceding attempt of hanging as evident in our case.¹

Thus it is a secondary combined suicide as the second method was used when the first had failed and at the same time the victims had foreseen the failure and had already planned for a second method. Hence it would be difficult to categorize this either as planned or unplanned complex suicide.



Fig. 6. Photograph showing two ligature materials with their free ends burnt tied to the wooden pole.

If both methods were employed together, the ligature material on the roof should have been burnt completely. But in this case only the ends showed burns which might be caused by the flames from the bodies. Many questions may remain unanswered if the scene of death is not visited. The scene may reveal features of suicide i.e. privacy, farewell letter and so on. Relatives or friends of the deceased at the scene may provide background information such as history of depression and of previous suicide attempts, marital, social or financial problems.³

This report demonstrates the importance of medico-legal investigations in combined suicide pact. Circumstances of death in such cases can be unfathomable by autopsy alone. Hence background history and scene investigation also plays an important role in solving such cases.

4. Conclusion

Secondary combined suicide pact is very unusual. A multidisciplinary approach is required to reconstruct the chronological order of events which would help to determine whether the dyadic deaths are suicide pact or homicide–suicide. It also helps to narrow down on the type of combined suicide. Statements of witnesses concerning the sequel of events, scene investigation apart from

meticulous autopsy would help in formulating the opinion as to the cause and manner of deaths in such cases.

Ethical approval

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Conflict of interest

None declared.

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